United Nations A/53/134

General Assembly

Distr.: General
1 June 1998

Original: English

Fifty-third session
Item 117 of the preliminary list*
Programme planning

Priority-setting within the medium-term plan

Report of the Secretary-General

1. This report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 1 of section III of General Assembly resolution 51/219 of 18 December 1996, by which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to present to the Committee for Programme and Coordination at its thirty-eighth session recommendations on priority-setting, including at the subprogramme level, within the medium-term plan for the period 1998-2001.

2. It may be recalled that at the forty-fourth session of the General Assembly, the Secretary-General submitted a comprehensive report on all aspects of priority-setting which covered the legislative background to priority-setting, the evolution of the legislative framework in this respect, the practical application of the legislative framework, the need to reconsider priority-setting and conclusions and recommendations (A/44/272). The General Assembly did not take a decision on the recommendations contained in that report.

3. The principal purpose of establishing priorities, as defined by the General Assembly in its resolution 36/228 A of 18 December 1981 is to rationalize and order the activities and provide a guide for the preparation of the programme budget. This is also embodied in the Regulations Governing Programme Planning, the Programme Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation. Regulation 4.18 states that "priorities, as determined by the General Assembly, in the medium-term plan shall guide the allocation of budgetary and extrabudgetary resources in the subsequent programme budgets".

4. According to existing regulations, priority in the medium-term plan is meant to be set at two levels: the subprogramme and programme levels. Regulation 4.16 states as follows:

> "Intergovernmental and expert bodies shall, when reviewing the relevant chapters of the proposed medium-term plan, recommend priorities among subprogrammes in their field of competence. They shall refrain from making recommendations on priority among major programmes. The Committee for Programme and Coordination, when making recommendations, and the Secretary-General, when making proposals on programme priorities shall take into account the views of the above-mentioned bodies."

Regulation 4.17 states that:

> "On the basis of the Secretary-General's proposals and of the recommendations of the Committee for Programme and Coordination, the General Assembly shall designate, among the subprogrammes it accepts, those which are of the highest and lowest priority."

* A/53/50.

98-15147 (E) 040698

5. Under the previous medium-term plan, the subprogramme was the link between the plan and the programme budget. Programmes were defined as consisting of all activities in a sector under the responsibility of a distinct organizational unit, normally at the division level, and subprogrammes were defined as consisting, within a programme, of all activities that are directed at the accomplishment of one medium-term objective or several closely related objectives. Under the current medium-term plan structure, the programme corresponds to a department or office and the subprogramme encompasses responsibilities entrusted to an organizational unit, normally at the division level. The programme under this new format equates therefore with a subprogramme under the previous medium-term plan.

6. Under the previous plan structure, all subprogrammes within a programme were, as a rule, governed by one functional or sectoral body. Within the previous programme for statistics, for instance, priorities were designated for subprogrammes because it was possible to determine which elements at the subprogramme level within the statistics programme could be accorded priority. Under the new plan structure, subprogrammes within a programme relate, in many instances, to more than one functional or sectoral body. Statistics, for example, now appears as a subprogramme, as does population, each linked to separate functional commissions but falling within a programme. The designation of priority among subprogrammes within a programme could not be achieved in the absence of overall direction from a single functional or sectoral body. In addition, the designation of priorities among subprogrammes in the new format, for example between General Assembly affairs and Security Council affairs, did not appear feasible or meaningful. In the medium-term plan for the period 1998-2001, the Secretary-General did not therefore propose, and the General Assembly did not establish, priority among subprogrammes.

7. The Regulations also foresee overall priorities for the medium-term plan. Regulation 4.2 states that the plan "shall reflect Member States' priorities as set out in legislation adopted by functional and regional intergovernmental bodies within their spheres of competence and by the General Assembly, on advice from the Committee for Programme and Coordination". Regulation 4.7 states that the plan shall be preceded by an introduction, which shall contain the Secretary-General's proposals on priorities. Under the new format of the plan, the introduction has been replaced by a perspective. With regard to the medium-term plan for the period 1998-2001, the Assembly decided in its resolution 51/219 of 18 December 1996 that the Organization would, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, give priority to the following areas of work during the implementation of the medium-term plan for the period 1998-2001:

(a) Maintenance of international peace and security;

(b) Promotion of sustained economic growth and sustainable development in accordance with the relevant resolutions of the General Assembly and recent United Nations conferences;

(c) Development of Africa;

(d) Promotion of human rights;

(e) Effective coordination of humanitarian assistance efforts;

(f) Promotion of justice and international law;

(g) Disarmament;

(h) Drug control, crime prevention and combating international terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.

8. The General Assembly, in effect, designated broad priority areas. By designating priority areas, the Assembly recognized that the activities carried out by a number of departments and offices should be undertaken in the context of those priorities. This was also consistent with the approach taken by the Assembly for the medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997, whereby, in its resolution 45/253 of 21 December 1990, it took note of the priorities contained in the introduction of the plan, that is peacemaking, peacekeeping and enhancement of the well-being of the peoples of the United Nations, and the priorities expressed by Member States, namely:

(a) Maintenance of international peace and security;

(b) The economic development of developing countries;

(c) The economic recovery and development of Africa;

(d) The environment;

(e) International drug control.

9. The General Assembly, in its resolution 41/213 of 19 December 1996, introduced a new dimension in priority-setting. It requested the Secretary-General to submit in the outline priorities reflecting general trends of a broad sectoral nature. In practical terms, the General Assembly, when it takes a decision on the outline provides to the Secretary-General guidance on the priorities immediately prior to the formulation of the proposed programme budget.

10. The question to be addressed is what, in essence, is the difference in the setting of priorities in the medium-term plan

and the setting of priorities in the outline. Priorities as determined by the General Assembly are meant to guide the allocation of resources in the budget. The provision of such guidance at two different stages in the process may appear redundant or may give rise to the provision of ambiguous guidance to the Secretary-General. This issue did not arise in the context of the current plan and programme budget, as the Assembly established identical priorities for the medium-term plan for the period 1998-2001 and for the outline for the biennium 1998-1999. These two decisions were taken within the same day. Priorities in the medium-term plan do not affect the content or substance of the plan. They reflect merely a question of emphasis. Priorities in the outline guide the Secretary-General in resource allocation when formulating his budget proposals.

11. The General Assembly may wish to consider the setting of overall priority in only one instance. The issue to be addressed, if this were considered, is whether priority should be set in the plan or in the outline. It would appear that the outline may be the better vehicle of the two. The outline, unlike the plan, deals with resources. It also covers a shorter time-frame and is prepared within months of the preparation of a proposed programme budget. The plan, on the other hand, covers a four-year period and needs a relatively long lead time for its preparation. This means that it is not always possible in the plan to take into account the latest legislative developments that may have a bearing on priorities.